

## ON THE NORTHERN UASO NYIRO.

By MERRELL DALTON.

The success of the small Lodge, erected by Kenya National Parks on the banks of the northern Uaso Nyiro in 1950, may be seen by the many delightful entries in the Visitor's Book proving that a camp of this description is appreciated, not only by so many of our own local people, but also by those drawn to it from places as far afield as South Africa, England and the United States. Members of the Walt Disney Film Co., for instance, made successful sequences of elephant, giraffe, buffalo, etc., when camping on the river in August last, (1952), and the studio report, as quoted to us by Mr. and Mrs. Al Milotte who were taking the pictures, states "they, (the studio) particularly liked the ones of the birds, remarking on the brilliance of the colour".

A couple from Natal, both keen ornithologists, remarked on the tameness and variety of the birds, and were thrilled to find the nests of no less than seven different species inside the small lodge perimeter.

This Lodge, which consists of four double cottages built of cedar logs and thatched with *makuti*, is situated some thirty four miles from Isiolo in the Marsabit National Reserve. The bandas are built close to the river, and are almost opposite the spot known to the local Samburu as 'Nyama Yangu' (or Newman's camp), for this was the headquarters of one of the greatest elephant hunters of his day. Huge acacia trees and *Aphania senegalensis* (which rather resembles a mango but is no relation), make dense green-black shade. Along the banks, there are dom palms, and, further upstream, fine specimens of *Piptadenia hildebrandtii* and Tana poplar.

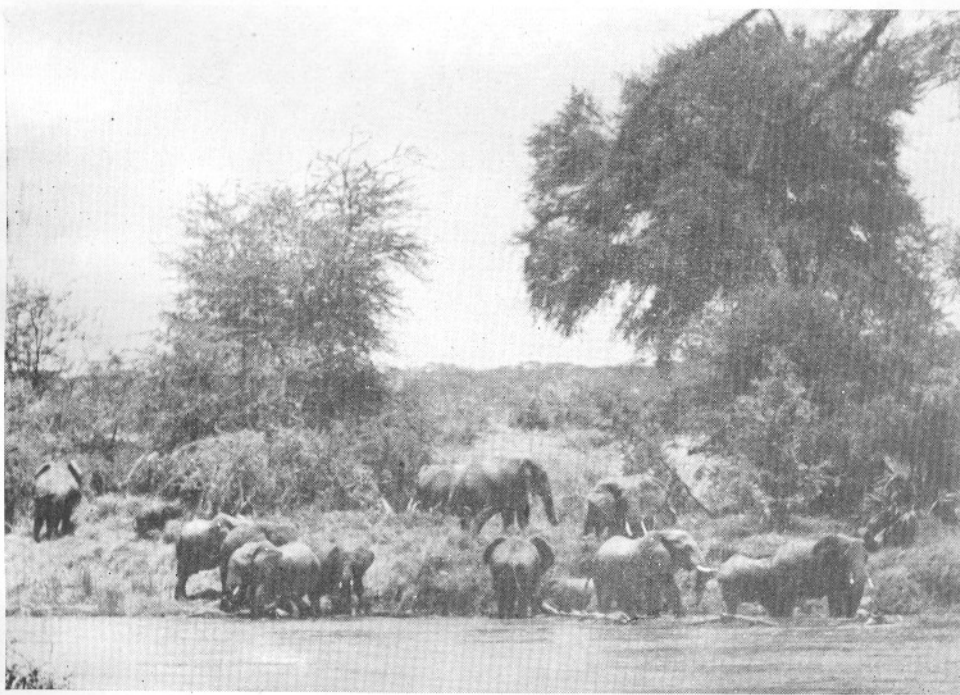
But the belt of vegetation is perilously shallow, great chunks of bank are devoured during the bi-yearly floods, and the debris of dead wood is considerable. Two of the worst factors, however, are the indiscriminate burning of trees by honey hunters, and the ravaging of bark, young trees and shoots by the multitudinous goats owned by the Samburu, and also by the Turkana who reside along the south bank of the river.

The opening of a track through the Reserve that extends from the main Marsabit road up to the old Barsalinga crossing, and beyond to the Maralal escarpment, has been very effective in stopping poaching on the north side. This is also patrolled by National Reserve scouts.

Those interested in game photography should have little difficulty in obtaining pictures of elephant, rhino, buffalo and other game. Elephant families are frequently seen bathing in the river in the hottest time of day. Lions are less easily come across, largely due to the nature of the bush and their wandering habits, but a pride of thirty was reported near Lolokwi—that great flat-topped hill that is such a well known N.F.D. landmark—in the first quarter of '51, and odd lion have often passed close to, or even right through, the environs of the camp. This area is best



*A view of part of the National Park Lodge on the Uaso Nyiro.*



*A group of elephants on the northern Uaso Nyiro.*

visited during the driest months for then the game is, of necessity, concentrated on the river which is at lowest level. Hundreds of animals water along this river, and the ground is a network of tracks graduating from the enormous footpads of elephant to rhino, buffalo, zebra, and giraffe, the spoor of countless antelope, the impress of the cat tribe, hyaenas, apes, mongooses, down to the tiny etched tracks of birds. Crocodiles are numerous and lie out sunning themselves on the open sand banks: they take toll of many sheep, goats, and buck, and have been known to pull down a full-grown giraffe which was drinking in the river.

Yet a pair of Egyptian geese, which frequented the shore opposite one of our temporary camps, were utterly indifferent to the crocodiles and wandered about plucking tufts of grass within a foot or two of the drowsing monsters. I once saw a crocodile driven out of its mud pool by two of the geese which pursued it to the water's edge with furious hissing and honking !

Impala abound around the Lodge site and have become increasingly tame, treating a car, quite rightly, as a tiresome intruder ! Grant's gazelle, gerenuk and oryx are more shy, but the waterbuck are quiet enough as are the giraffe and handsome Grevy's zebra.

Baboons move about in troops of fifty or more. Do they patrol their own 'beat' one wonders? It seems probable that families keep very much to certain localities providing the larder remains good. After a day of gleaning in the bush for insects, scorpions, seed, and wild fruits the troop returns home to the river for a drink, later to climb into comfortable and safe forks and niches in the fig and acacia trees for their night's lodging.

It is fascinating to watch a party out foraging. The troop is usually accompanied by a sentinel, some old man baboon who gives utterance to a resounding 'hoch' if danger threatens whilst the rest busy themselves diligently turning over stones and digging for grubs and beetles. The baby baboons when tired, or too small to keep up, are carried on their mother's back or tummies, often sitting erect like miniature jockeys.

Baboons move with a peculiar loping stride and must cover a considerable area of ground as well as combing that ground very thoroughly. It is surprising how these heavy animals can roost in quite light foliage, and when the wild figs and other fruits and berries ripen they seem able to reach the further clusters with the agility of any monkey.

The quantity of riverine birds seems to vary with the seasons. Wood Ibis and Jabiru Stork are more rarely seen but herons, egrets, bittern and geese are fairly common, especially at low water when the catchments made by old logs, boughs, reed islets and driftwood hold an infinite variety of insect life and the green grass of the banks is alive with frogs, grass-hoppers, mice and beetles. And surely, the Goliath heron, standing with bent knee, long powerful beak poised to strike, shadow reflected in the stream, is one of the loveliest sights to be encountered on the river? The tracks of these

great birds, unlike the flurry of plover and scratching of guinea fowl, are grave and ponderous as befits a conscientious fisherman.

Other birds to be recognised in this area are kingfishers, parakeets, orioles, green and gold bee-eaters, gorgeous rollers, sunbirds, plovers and wagtails, flycatchers, drongos, hoopoes, woodpeckers, gay yellow weavers and their sombre and quarrelsome cousins the sparrow weavers, red-winged starlings and louries to name a few of them. The guinea fowls in the vicinity of the Lodge are tame as poultry, and there are enormous flocks of the brilliant vulturine species, more showy from the photographer's point of view than is the gentleman in the helmet. There are plenty of game birds too, francolin, sandgrouse, and lesser bustard. Greater bustard are more usually found in the open country between Barsalinga and Wamba and the Maralal escarpment. Birds of prey include the magnificent Bateleur eagle, the fish eagle, the crested hawk eagle, eagle owls, hawks, harries, vultures and kites.

A small stone bird bath in front of the bandas has done much towards creating an atmosphere of friendliness, and the weavers, pigeons, hornbills and doves, and delightful little Grant's francolin like miniature bantams now hop about on the open ground joined by gregarious starlings. Please spare your crumbs for them !

Most local residents are aware that the N.F.P. is a 'closed' area, and this necessitates taking out an outlying district pass from the District Commissioner, Isiolo, or from the D.C. Maralal, (Samburu) should you come in via Rumuruti. The camp is so popular that it is wisest to book well ahead, and this is done through National Parks head office, post box number 2076, Nairobi. The charge is moderate enough, being only five shillings per head per night, and all that is required of you to bring is your bedding, (beds, nets, and "Dunlopillo" mattresses are provided), personal effects, crockery, food, and tableware, cooking pots and a servant for your own convenience. Your banda contains a large table on the veranda, several chairs, a long bath, a basin, and hot and cold water is laid on to every cottage.

There is a guide resident at the camp whose services can be hired for five shillings a day, and there are two loop roads to explore, one leading to the top of flat crowned Archer's Post hill, (site of the original Post through which all mail, stores, etc., were transported by camel, donkeys, and bullock wagons to the forward stations of the frontier), and the other circles round Koitogor, a rugged massif, where, if you go early enough, you should find rhino, and perhaps buffalo and elephant, as they wend their way back into the scrub after their nocturnal watering at the river.

As petrol can now be obtained at the Lodge it is easy to make various sorties. The road to the camp leads on for some seventy miles upstream and eventually hits off the Wamba Maralal road at the foot of the escarpment. Or you can turn off part way, and, with the help of the guide, cross a wide plain which is a short cut over to Wamba and a very favoured spot for rhino which can be seen wandering about right out in open ground or browsing along the edge of the thicket.

On our first visit to this plain we counted nine rhino !